Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery Planning

Jeffrey P. Back

Business Continuity Planning

Business continuity planning is the way an organization can prepare for and aid in disaster recovery. It is an arrangement agreed upon in advance by management and key personnel of the steps that will be taken to help the organization recover should any type of disaster occur. These programs prepare for multiple problems. Detailed plans are created that clearly outline the actions that an organization or particular members of an organization will take to help recover/restore any of its critical operations that may have been either completely or partially interrupted during or after a disaster or other extended disruptions in operations.

A Business Continuity Plan (BCP) is a blueprint of how an organization will guard against future disasters that could endanger its long-term health. BCPs take into account disasters that can occur on multiple geographic levels-local, regional, and national-disasters like fires, earthquakes, or pandemic illness. BCPs should be live and evolving strategies that are adjusted for any potential disasters that would require recovery; it should include everything from computer viruses to terrorist attacks. The ultimate goal is to help expedite the recovery of an organization's critical functions and manpower following these types of disasters.

Benefits of Business Continuity Planning

Business Continuity planning is an essential part of running any modern organization and there is a multiplicity of benefits in planning for Business Continuity within your organization. Not only will your data, hardware, software, etc., be better protected, but the people within your organization will be better safeguarded should a disaster occur.

Any unexpected event can severely disrupt the operation, continuity, and effectiveness of your business. Disabling events can come in all shapes and sizes. They can vary from the more common calamities like hard drive corruption, building fires or flooding to the rarer, yet more severe and often longer lasting disruptions that can occur on a city-wide or even national basis; events such as disruptions in transport (oil crises, metro shut-downs, transport worker, strikes, etc.), infrastructure weakening from terrorist attacks, or even severe loss of staff due to illness like a pandemic flu.

Therefore, putting business continuity plans into practice in your organization now can prepare your business for most any potential disaster, help ensure that you will be able to maintain continuity of your business practices, and reduce or even possibly remove the effect such calamities could have on your organization.

In addition to the above mentioned benefits, the following are also advantages of business continuity planning:

- If not already, your organization my soon be required to incorporate some type of Business Continuity Management planning into its policies by either corporate governance or governmental legislation. (e.g., HIPAA)

- With an effective and practiced Business Continuity plan, your insurance company may well view you more favorably should some sort of disaster ever require you to call upon their services.
- In creating a Business Continuity plan, the process of evaluating potential weakness and planning how to deal with what could possibly go wrong often offers management the chance to gain a better understanding of the minutia of their business and ultimately helps an organization identify ways to strengthen any weaknesses. Business Continuity planning can often create awareness of useful ways to improve an organization, sometimes even in areas that had previously gone unconsidered.
- Business Continuity planning will make your organization more robust. It can strengthen your organization not only against large-scale problems it can also help make smaller problems that might have caused continuity interruptions to become irrelevant, through detailed planning.

Disaster Recovery

Disaster Recovery is the process an organization uses to recover access to their software, data, and/or hardware that are needed to resume the performance of normal, critical business functions after the event of either a natural or human-induced disaster. While Disaster Recovery plans, or DRPs, often focus on bridging the gap where data, software, or hardware have been damaged or lost, one cannot forget the vital element of manpower that composes much of any organization. A building fire might predominantly affect vital data storage; whereas an epidemic illness is more likely to have an affect on staffing. Both types of disaster need to be considered when creating a Disaster Recovery Plan. Thus, organizations should include in their DRPs contingencies for how they will cope with the sudden and/or unexpected loss of key personnel as well as how to recover their data.

Disaster Recovery Plans are generally part of a larger, more extensive practice known as Business Continuity Planning. Disaster Recovery plans should be well practiced so that the key players are familiar with the specific actions they will need to take should a disaster occur. Disaster Recovery plans must also be adaptable and routinely updated, e.g. if new people, a new branch office, or new hardware or software are added to an organization they should promptly be incorporated into the organization's disaster recovery plan.

Business Continuity & Disaster Recovery Planning

Disasters, unpredictable by nature, can strike anywhere at anytime with little or no warning. Recovering from one can be stressful, expensive and time consuming, particularly for those who have not taken the time to think ahead and prepare for such possibilities. However, when disaster strikes, those who have prepared and made recovery plans tend to survive with comparatively minimal loss and/or disruption of productivity.

Disasters can take several different forms. For instance, there are those that primarily impact individuals -- e.g., hard drive meltdowns -- while others have a larger, collective impact, such as power outages, floods, fires, storms, equipment failure, sabotage, terrorism, or even epidemic illness.

Each of these can at the very least cause short-term disruptions in normal business operation. But recovering from the impact of many of the aforementioned disasters can take much longer, especially if organizations have not made preparations in advance.

Most of us recognize that these potential problems as possibilities. Unfortunately the randomness of some of these disasters lulls some organizations into a sense of false security. However, if proper preparations have been made, the disaster recovery process does not have to be exceedingly stressful. Instead the process can be streamlined, but this facilitation of recovery will only happen where preparations have been made. Organizations that take the time to implement disaster recovery plans ahead of time often ride out catastrophes with minimal or no loss of data, hardware, or business revenue.

The primary goal of any disaster recovery plan is to help the organization maintain its business continuity, minimize damage, and prevent loss. Therefore, the most important question to ask when evaluating your disaster recovery plan is, "Will my plan work?" The best way to ensure reliability of one's plan is to practice it regularly. Have the appropriate people actually practice what they would do to help recover business function should a disaster occur. Also regular reviews and updates of recovery plans should be scheduled. Some organizations find it helpful to do this on a monthly basis so that the plan stays current and reflects the needs an organization has today, and not just the data, software, etc., it had six months ago.

Plan Development Steps

The primary objective of a Disaster Recovery plan (a.k.a. Business Continuity plan) is the description of how an organization has to deal with potential natural or human-induced disasters. The disaster recovery plan steps that every enterprise incorporates as part of business management includes the guidelines and procedures to be undertaken to effectively respond to and recover from disaster recovery scenarios, which adversely impacts information systems and business operations. Steps that are well-constructed and implemented will enable organizations to minimize the effects of the disaster and resume mission-critical functions rapidly.

Business Continuity or DRP steps involve an extensive analysis of an organization's business processes, IT infrastructure, data backup, resources, continuity requirements and disaster prevention methods. Secondly, it is the process of creating a comprehensive document encompassing details that will aid businesses in recovering from catastrophic events. Developing a disaster recovery plan differs between enterprises based on business type, processes, the security levels needed, and the organization size. There are various stages involved in developing an effective Disaster Recovery or Business Continuity planning. The key phases and the plan steps are outlined below:

Phase I – Data Collection

1. Project should be organized with timeline, resources, and expected output
2. Business impact analysis should be conducted at regular intervals
3. Risk assessment should be conducted regularly
4. Onsite and Offsite Backup and Recovery procedures should be reviewed
5. Alternate site location must be selected and ready for use

Phase II – Plan Development and Testing

1. Development of Disaster Recovery Plan
2. Testing the plan

Phase III – Monitoring and Maintenance

1. Maintenance of the Plan through updates and review
2. Periodic inspection of DRP
3. Documentation of changes

Conclusions

The pitfalls that await those developing a business continuity plan are numerous. Most importantly you should know that one size does not fit all when it comes to developing a business continuity plan. Using someone else's plan or template based on conditions or requirement not relevant to your organization may result in a disaster of another type.

Companies must consider all facets of their organization as well as update and practice their plan if they want to maximize their recovery after a disaster. Advanced planning can help an organization minimize the amount of loss and downtime while simultaneously creating its best chance to fully recover rapidly after a disaster.